A Paradigm Shift in Corporate In-house English Training in Japan

A Paradigm Shift in Corporate In-house English Training in Japan

Yoichi SATO

1. Introduction

Human resources (HR) development is often considered one of the most salient avenues through which to foster the sustainable development of Japanese companies. In a large number of Japanese companies, corporate training programmes are implemented in order to realise this continuous improvement and development of their human capital. These corporate training programmes vary from company to company, and historically they have often been subject to change due to sociocultural metamorphosis as it continues to occur in Japan. Recently, English communication skills are frequently dealt with as an important component of corporate training as they are linked with the notion of rapid globalisation. Although there is a burgeoning interest shown in corporate in-house English training recently, its origin actually dates back to the Meiji period. Besides, despite the recent attention-grabbing phenomenon, HR officers in many companies in Japan still experience difficulty when determining the goals and content of their corporate in-house English training due to rapidly changing social needs. This study investigates what metamorphosis Japanese corporate in-house English training policies have been through and then presents some insight into the further development of corporate training in the context of globalisation in Japan. To begin with, I will briefly explain some unique aspects of corporate training in Japanese companies.

2. Management styles and corporate training in Japan

The Japanese management style is often said to be very unique. Some researchers argued that this uniqueness must have resulted in the rapid economic recovery of Japan after World War II. Vogel (1979), in his seminal

work, identified three distinctive features of Japanese management styles, namely, 1) life-long employment, 2) seniority-based promotion and 3) intra organisational labour unions. These three features are believed to be deeply related to the philosophy of corporate training in Japan.

Full-time employees in Japan often presuppose life-long employment as a corporate virtue. Employees, once entering a company, are supposed to exert themselves to continuously contribute to the organisation until their age of retirement, in theory. Employees often experience personnel reshuffles in order to have a chance to observe various aspects of the entire organisation. Longitudinal involvement in the company also helps develop one's competency as a generalist.

This life-long employment also legitimises one's promotion on the basis of seniority, or how long one has been involved in the organisation. Basically, the longer they work, the higher status they are likely to obtain in the organisation. This evaluation based on seniority can be considered quite bizarre in the business context of Western countries, in which producing results and having necessary skills and experience are the keys to promotion.

In order to perpetuate this seniority-based promotion, having a labour union as an intra-organisational institution usually plays a facilitative role. Generally speaking, labour unions in Japan have influential power on organisational decision-making. The attendees of such labour unions often strive to improve working conditions and to maintain employment regulations, including the promotion criteria.

The above three features are said to have contributed to forming unique HR development strategies in Japanese companies. Employees in a Japanese company are expected to acquire necessary skills and experience not only through business activities on site, but also by taking relevant corporate training. Iwata (2011) claims that implementing corporate training as in-house praxis is one of the unique characteristics of Japanese HR development strategies. Out of all kinds of corporate training, Japanese companies are recently very eager to design curricula to help employees develop global business communication skills, especially English-speaking abilities. In the following section, I will briefly delineate the status quo of corporate in-house English training.

3. What are corporate in-house English training programmes?

Corporate training is regularly conducted in the majority of companies in Japan. A great deal of such training has been positioned as a part of HR development strategies in Japanese companies. Generally speaking, corporate training in Japanese companies can be classified into two types: 1) skill-based

training (relatively short-term goals), and 2) on-the-job training (relatively long-term goals). The former one contributes to the trainees' future career development, and the latter one to helping trainees better understand the entire organisation in order to establish in-company harmony. This intra-organisational integrity is considered an essential basis for one to be acculturated in life-long working conditions.

Corporate in-house English training, which is an example of skill-based training, is currently one of the most demanded programmes in this country. A nationwide survey conducted by Recruit in 2012 indicated that approximately 77% of small-to-middle-sized companies are eager to introduce English training, let alone almost all leading companies. Along with the rapid globalisation of this country, the role of corporate in-house English training is expected to change.

Corporate training programmes do not have fixed forms. Rather, they vary from company to company. Each company determines their corporate training curriculum by considering various factors, such as company policy, ultimate goals of the training, and financial limitations.

As was mentioned in the previous section, corporate training in Japanese companies is unique in that it is implemented as a part of HR development strategies. According to Senuma (2001), nearly 100% of the leading companies in Japan implement corporate training for their full-time employees despite the current economic recession. From among all kinds of corporate training, English training garners a great deal of attention. For, having a good command of English is gradually becoming a must for many Japanese employees, particularly in leading companies. It is predicted that this trend will accelerate toward the Tokyo 2020 Olympic/Paralympic Games.

4. History of corporate in-house English training

As was mentioned earlier, the unique Japanese style of business administration or management contributes to developing the in-group solidarity of Japanese organisations (e.g., Doi, 1971; Nakane, 1967; Sugiyama, 1974). The Corporate training currently implemented in Japanese companies also plays a facilitative role in informing shared values intra-organizationally. Despite its historicity, the forms of corporate training in Japan have been subject to change from time to time. Iwata (2011) provided a comprehensive review on the historical change of corporate in-house English training in Japan from the view point of HR development. This study, based off of her discussion, will present some additional perspectives retrieved through my participant observation, as a former freelance corporate trainer, as well as relevant personal interviews with HR managers in several Japanese companies.

Corporate training in Japan has a long history. According to Sakaguchi (1992), the fundamental form of corporate training dates back to as early as the middle of the 19th century. In this period, employees had to develop their understanding about their workplaces through experience; not through organised systematic training. Workers were considered apprentices of their disciplines. In this apprenticeship system, senior workers were supposed to be trainers for the junior workers. This apprenticeship value system still somewhat remains, which legitimises the OJT in a myriad of Japanese companies even in the current era.

Corporate training for developing specific skills as a part of HR development, however, started after the end of World War II. Iwata (2011) explained that, in as early as the 1950's, corporate in-house English training in the context of Japan emerged. It first happened in a Tokyo-based trading company where employees started a voluntary English learning group activity. Later on, the HR department of the company provided the group with financial support for sustainable, continuous development because they recognised its educational efficiency. It was not until the 1960's that many other companies, enlightened by the said company, began to develop their own systematic corporate training policy, programmes and curricula. The term *Kigyō kenshū* (企業研修, corporate training) was then coined and then introduced to a wider context at that time (Motoki, 2001).

From the latter 1960's to the early 1970's, Japanese society experienced rapid economic growth as a result of dramatic post-war recovery. Along with this social change, the corporate training needed to also be gradually changed. The old school, independent study group activity where trainees were expected to develop English literacy gradually lost momentum. In its stead, more customised training for practical purposes with self-enlightening features became fashionable (Chida, 2009). Companies would implement training for selected trainees in order to maximise the effect while trying to minimise the training costs.

In the late 1970's, the need for Japanese businesspeople to use English for practical purposes overseas mushroomed. The introduction of free trading systems further accelerated the needs for English-speaking business people. As background information, one must refer to the turbulence of the world economy as a result of the oil crises in the 1970's; the first one occurred in 1973, and the other in 1979. As a result, Japanese companies were suddenly faced with the task of minimising losses in overseas business. Many companies tackled this task with a great sense of urgency. To survive this difficult time, Japanese companies were in need of helping employees acquire necessary English skills to cope with the situation. Many HR managers I worked with before

commented that this socioeconomic transition in Japan also influenced the objectives of corporate training, especially in the 1970's and 1980's.

In the 1970's and 1980's, motivating trainees to study English for self-enlightenment was found insufficient as an objective of corporate training. Rather, there was a burgeoning interest shown toward practical skill training among HR officers. Corporate in-house English training was thus conducted with a special focus on nurturing regional human capital. Conventionally, providing intensive training focused on a selected few had been common in corporate training. After the 1980's, however, enhancing the English proficiency of all the employees in entire organisations became the central concern of policy-makers.

In the 1990's, after the bubble economy went bust, HR managers felt the need for developing a new concept in connection with advanced corporate training. The domestic market in Japan gradually shrank as a result of the economic recession. Therefore, Japanese companies were in need of further exploring overseas markets with promising growth potential. Corporate in-house English training thus focused upon helping trainees acquire more advanced business skills. These advanced skills were deemed necessary in that they could help employees expand their future potential which would put them on a track towards eventually qualifying for regional management positions. At the same time, such advanced business skills in English could also qualify employees for further training overseas which could include MBA (Master of Business Administration) degrees at prestigious institutions. Along with the aforementioned, demand for customised private lessons rose so as to satisfy the need for more diversified individual training.

The increasing demand for customised private lessons in corporate training programmes also changed the trainers' working conditions. In the decade of the 1990's, the deregulation of the Worker Dispatching Act (Rōdōsha-haken-hō, 労働者派遣法) took place. McConnell (2000) observed that this deregulation allowed private language schools in educational business industries to dispatch contracted workers to the arena of language education, primarily in public junior/senior high schools and secondarily in corporate language training situations. Employers could take advantage of the inclusion of dispatched instructors for HR development in theory because it could help reduce labour costs and also simplify the necessary paperwork in the long run (e.g., Sato, 2012, 2014a).

This inclusion of dispatched corporate trainers became trendier in the first decade of the 21st century along with the increasing demand for global HR development. As Yamamoto (2006) explained, advanced English competence is rapidly becoming an indispensable constituent in determining HR

management and development policies in the context of globalisation in Japan. Returnees with MBAs were hence expected to play central roles in developing potential markets overseas.

This business expansion overseas has been being further accelerated since the middle of 2012 when Rakuten declared the launch of their English-based business operations. Hiroshi Mikitani, the CEO of Rakuten, recommends that although the MBA earning process was valuable for future career development, current Japanese companies should also develop new language management policies in order to maintain the linguistic infrastructure to use English as a common code of communication, or *Englishnization* (Mikitani, 2013). Mikitani believes that the use of English will help Japanese companies catch up with the global competition. Current examples of increasingly demanded corporate in-house English training are as follows (see Sato (2017) for more information about these examples of corporate in-house English training programmes in Japanese companies). The following Table 1, which originally appeared in Sato (2017, p. 3), also contains some general information about the average number of trainees in one lesson, training duration, average lesson time, training goals, and frequency.

Table 1: Examples of currently demanded corporate training

Types of training	Class size	Training duration	Lesson time (average)	Training Goals	Frequency of conduct
Pre-departure training	Private or semi-private	About a month	Three to five hours a day	Basic English Training (mainly grammar) Technical/Business English training Cross-cultural understanding	Often but irregular schedule
Intensive training	5 to 10 trainees	A few weeks	Eight to ten hours a day	Basic English training (mainly grammar) Technical/Business English training Test preparation (mainly TOEIC) Freshman English training (including OJT) Presentation/meeting/ negotiation skills Cross-cultural understanding	Several times a year

Test preparation	10 to 20 trainees	About half a year	90 minutes to two hours a day	TOEIC test (targeting 630, 760, or 860 points is most common) TOEFL test BULATS test (focus on speaking)	Quite regular
Seminar	80 to 100 trainees	One or two day(s)	three hours a day or more	Cross-cultural understanding Basic (business) conversation training Skill-getting Workshops	Once or twice a year

5. Problems and solutions

Reality anticipates that the rapid economic globalisation in Japan will continue until the Tokyo 2020 Olympic/Paralympic games. For further globalisation, implementing corporate training as well as fostering employees' English competence will be indispensable when things are considered from an HR development/management point of view. Currently, the main focus of many such corporate training programmes is not upon receptive skills, but upon productive skills, such as presenting, conducting meetings and writing e-mails.

It has been reported that corporate training with a focus on productive skills frequently results in a positive effect noticed in various contexts (e.g., Sato, 2014a). However, my observation suggests that the majority of Japanese businesspeople are still struggling with English communication and thus are in need of further training to acquire sufficient business English skills (Sato, 2014a; 2016). This paradox does not necessarily mean that the corporate training in action has been implemented for nothing. Rather, I interpret this paradox, based on my own experience, as an indication that newly conceptualised corporate training curricula have to be developed in order to satisfy the diversified needs of global HR development and management.

In my previous study (Sato, 2014a), I conducted surveys in three engineering companies in the Tokyo area. I interviewed with my trainees, HR managers and other instructors about their thoughts about on-going corporate training in order to gain insight into improving the curricula. The results suggested that, though the interviewees were mostly satisfied with the corporate training, they still found the on-going programmes insufficient. The primary stakeholders, or trainees, commonly responded that the programmes' sole reliance on the *first-language* (L1) standard for evaluating trainees' performance could be somewhat questionable. They were aware that their business counterparts are mostly *second-language* (L2) English speakers, especially the ones with a Southeast Asian background. Most of the trainers they work with, however, base their instruction standards on the L1 English standard because that is

the most feasible approach. This theory-practice dilemma may result in eventual customer dissatisfaction. To improve this situation, the introduction of BELF (business English as a lingua franca) training, in which the communication standard is based on the L2 criteria rather than L1, would be beneficial. Our previous discussion showed that the curriculum developers could largely benefit from employing the perspectives of second language acquisition for improving the *status quo* of corporate in-house business English training programmes (Sato, Nakatake, Satake & Hug, 2015).

Such needs are not always communicated to HR managers. Not being necessarily professional in relation to business English curriculum development, managers in HR departments are in a position in which they inevitably rely on the training curricula offered by consulting companies. Additionally, the complex social needs related to English make it difficult for HR managers to understand what it is like to develop corporate in-house English training curricula. When I was a freelance corporate trainer, I experienced in many companies that the HR managers there asked me to help the trainees "pass" the TOEIC test toward the end of the courses. Since the TOEIC test is designed to show the test-takers' English proficiency by means of numerical measurement (from 10 to 990), whether trainees "pass" or not obviously does not matter. These HR managers' inquiries suggest that corporate in-house English training, in general, can be frequently designed and implemented without much critical consideration of theory and practice, which is in a sense inevitable. In this situation, relying on the L1 standard to evaluate the trainees' growth is naturally the most trusted approach for the time being on the one hand. But on the other, it can also trigger theoretical fallacy especially when the L1-standard of English training is conducted toward those who will be involved in business with people from the L2 English speaking background (Sato, 2014b). To solve this problem, raising the awareness of trainees and HR managers is an indispensable first step.

6. For future curriculum development

Based on the above argument, I would like to mention some points for further curriculum development, especially for those who are potential stakeholders of this paper. As potential stakeholders of this discussion, I can list up the following four: 1) future corporate trainees, 2) HR managers and policy makers, 3) non-Japanese businesspeople, and 4) other corporate trainers working in Japan. I will explain which party can get what kind of benefit from this paper as follows. Please note that the following discussion is based on my doctoral dissertation (Sato, 2017).

First, future corporate trainees are strongly advised not to look only at L1

English as the standard of English-speaking business. As Crystal (2003) indicated, L2 English speakers have already outnumbered L1 English counterparts recently. In this situation, Japanese English speakers are more likely to interact with L2 English speakers than L1 speakers in the actual global business context (also see Graddol (2006) for more information). Conventionally, developing participants' linguistic competence is the main focus of corporate in-house English training. Trainees' achievement is often measured by comparing the TOEIC test score growth between pre-test and post-test. As was mentioned earlier, this type of training can contribute to fostering participants' communicative competence, particularly for novice level trainees. Nevertheless, "placing too much value on being trained to speak English for business purposes based only on the L1 standard will perhaps paradoxically transfer a "native speaker problem" (Victor, 2013) to us Japanese" (Sato, 2017, p. 222) English speakers. Although helping develop trainees' English competence is prerequisite, fostering intercultural communicative competence (ICC) through such English training is a key. To do so, future trainees are encouraged to utilise more Japanese L2 English pragmatics through corporate business language training. It has been reported that this trial-based approach will be effective in raising trainees' intercultural awareness (Sato, 2014b).

While trainees are encouraged to pay attention to their L2 English pragmatics, HR managers are advised to further consider the possibility of developing training curricula to foster participants' L2 English pragmatics and ICC to supplement on-going business English training. Sato (2016) suggested that, in such supplementary corporate training, conducting meeting role-play activities for collective decision-making would be effective, because it contributes to raising the participants' awareness of their own communication styles. Besides, as the number of immigrants has gradually increased recently, the social mobility of Japan is also changing. An increasing number of Japanese companies are now eager to hire employees from non-Japanese cultural backgrounds. My participant observation in several Tokyo-based companies suggested that the number of non-Japanese corporate trainees has gradually and steadily increased these few years. In conventional corporate training, the pre-set L1-standard-based curricula usually renders the trainers to deal with students rather uniformly, which does not leave them much room to take the participants' different cultural backgrounds into consideration. Thus, the non-Japanese participants' intercultural experience and understanding were not fully utilised during the training. Constructing this peer-coaching model between Japanese and non-Japanese corporate trainees would be an indispensable key factor in order to design and implement successful

globalisation strategies in connection with Englishnization in the not so distant future.

In addition to corporate trainees and HR managers, corporate trainers working in Japan, L1 or L2 English speaking instructors regardless, should raise their awareness of Japanese L2 English-speaking discourse. As was mentioned earlier, conventional approaches have been based on the L1 standard. Henceforth, any Japanese-flavored L2 English pragmatics, especially pragmatic ambiguity, are almost automatically identified as problematic. However, my previous research noted that tolerance to such pragmatic ambiguity is a constituent of the Japanese communication style (Sato, 2016). With BELF training in mind, it is not too much to say that we cannot simply advise Japanese to stop using ambiguous pragmatics. Besides, since ambiguous pragmatics are quite innately installed in Japanese communication system, merely imposing the L1 standard is not educationally ethical. In order to improve this situation, we should rather encourage trainees to think about how to better include their *culture* in their BELF interaction while advising them to eliminate their pragmatic behaviours that can trigger *unnecessary* communication conflict as much as possible.

Furthermore, business consultancy researchers from non-Japanese backgrounds can also be stakeholders of this paper. Along with the on-going Abenomics as well as the upcoming Tokyo 2020 Olympics, an increasing number of business people will continue to look to Japan as a powerful business market. Despite the staggering economic conditions in Japan, its worldwide economic presence still lives on. A large number of non-Japanese business people want to communicate with Japanese people in many business respects. In this situation, English is the *de facto* standard language, or "a shared and neutral communication code" (Louhiala-Salminen *et al.*, 2005, p. 403). My interview with L1 English speaking corporate trainers, however, suggested that those who are not familiar with Japanese communication styles would possibly have difficulty grasping Japanese ambiguous pragmatics (Sato, 2015). To solve this potential communication conflict, simply having Japanese trainees acquire global business English communication competence is insufficient. enough. Rather, in the context outside Japan, conducting intercultural training with an orientation to understanding Japanese communication styles would be beneficial. Those who are interested in interacting with Japanese business people in the near future will receive immense benefit from partaking in this intercultural awareness raising in that it can help avoid unnecessary miscommunication which results not from linguistic deficiency, but from pragmatic differences.

7. Conclusion

History has suggested that corporate in-house English training in Japanese companies is by no means a new phenomenon. This training is in connection with the unique management style in Japan, which can even allude to the possibility that had it not been for the training system this remarkable economic development might not have occurred. Further stated, socioeconomic conditions have also largely influenced the policy makers and HR managers in determining the training goals, content and assessment criteria. Recently, there is a burgeoning interest shown in the introduction of Englishnization as an experiment to develop further globalisation strategies in a large number of Japanese companies. By the time Englishnization has been commonly observed in the context of Japan, fostering non-Japanese business people's communication strategies will have been a must when designing and implementing any corporate in-house English training.

Although corporate in-house English training, in general, often reportedly results in a positive effect, a general consensus about the direction of future training curricula has not been fully achieved among those concerned. Corporate trainees deal with difficulty maintaining their motivation while taking part in the training sessions. HR managers and policy makers often fail in providing a clear vision of the designed and implemented training. Corporate trainers, who are intended to play significant roles to process globalisation in Japanese companies, should be better included in the process of continuous development. Conventional methodologies based on the L1 standard apparently face their potential limitations, which will leave BELF training curricula as a possible alternative approach. As the above three parties are definitely key constituents for further globalisation, their actual voices should be more carefully considered and incorporated into the process of future curriculum development.

Business consultancy researchers being interested in developing corporate training curricula are also advised to eagerly take L2 English pragmatic/discourse features by Japanese speakers into consideration in the content-designing process. To be noted is the fact that an assessment of the efficacy of this L2 pragmatic training remains to be discussed. Future studies should focus on the above points in order to provide better BELF training curricula as a part of further globalisation strategies in a number of Japanese companies.

References

Chida, J. (2009). Tokushū: TOEIC no kiseki. [Special report: The miracle of TOEIC] TOIEC *Newsletter, 105*, 10-13.

Crystal, D. (2003), *English as a global language*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Doi, T. (1971). "*Amae" no kōzō* [Anatomy of interdependence]. Tokyo: Kobundo.

Graddol, D. (2006). *English next*. London: British Council.

Iwata, K. (2011). The development of in-company English education and its educational significance. *Nakamura Gakuen Daigaku/Nakamura Gakuen Daigaku Tanki Digakubu Kenkyū Kiyō*, *43*, 175-186.

Louhiala-Salminen, L., Charles, M., and Kankaanranta; A. (2005). English as a lingua franca in Nordic corporate mergers: Two case companies. *English for Specific Purposes*, *24*, 401-421.

McConnell, D. (2000). *Importing diversity: Inside Japan's JET programme*. California, CA: University of California Press.

Mikitani, H. (2012). *Takaga ēgo!* [It's just English!]. Tokyo: Kodansha.

Motoki, K. (2001). Sangyō kyōiku kenkyū to kigyōnai kyōiku. [The research on industrial education and corporate in-house education] *Sangyō kyōikugaku kenkyū*, *30* (1), 1-6.

Nakane, C. (1967). *Tateshakai no ningenkankē*. [Human relations in a vertical society.] Tokyo: Kōdansha.

Sakaguchi, S. (1992). *Kindai nihon no kigyōnai kyōiku kunren jokan/gekan* [Corporate in-house education and training in modern Japan]. Self-publication.

Sato, Y. (2014a). English education in Japanese companies: Comparing three Japanese global companies. *The Journal of International Business Communication, 73*, 45-52.

Sato, Y. (2014b). Proposing a new concept of a corporate training programme for L2 English use: A case study of a role-play activity for raising self-awareness. In: T. Gally, Y. Sato, M. Nakatake, Y. Satake, and A. Mills (eds.), *Changing roles of foreign language teaching/learning in the context of globalisation in Japan*. (pp. 125-144). Tokyo: MAYA consortium.

Sato, Y. (2016). Wa wo omonjiru meikakuka, fudōi, konsensasu keisē ni kansuru shitsutekidanwabunseki: Nihonjin bijinesupāson no esunogurafikku kēsusutadī [A qualitative analysis on harmony-oriented clarification, disagreement and consensus-making: An ethnographic case study of Japanese business people]. *KLA Journal, 3,* 39-52.

Sato, Y. (2017). *Changing roles of corporate business language training in the context of globalisation in Japan: A longitudinal organisational ethnography*. Unpublished Doctoral Dissertation (submitted draft). The University of Tokyo.

Sato, Y., Nakatake, M., Satake, Y., and Hug, J. (2015). About the changing roles of foreign language teaching/learning in the context of globalisation in Japan. *KLA Journal, 2*, 1-14.

Senuma, K. (2001). *Nihongata shōgai gakushū no tokuchō to shinkōsaku*. Gakubunsha

[Japanese style life-long education and its development strategies]. Tokyo: Gakubunsha.

Sugiyama, L.T. (1974). *Japanese patterns of behavior*. Honolulu, HI: University of Hawaii Press.

Victor, D. (2013). Officially mandated BELF and the native speaker problems. *The Journal of International Business Communication*, 72, 57-62.

Vogel, E. (1979). *Japan as number 1: Lessons for America*. New York, NY: Harper & Row Publishers.

Yamamoto, C. (2006). Gurōbaru jinzai manējimento ron: Nihonkigyō no kokusaika to jinzaikatsuyō [Theory of global human resources management: internationalisation and human resources utilisation in Japanese companies]. Tokyo: Toyokeizai Shinbosha.

（2017 年 9 月 5 日受理）